DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 299 085 RC 016 755

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TITLE Culture Specific Materials: Stories My Kokum and Mushoom Tell.
PUB DATE [87]
NOTE 14p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Canada Natives; *Child Development; Child Psychology; Cultural Education; *Culture Conflict; Elementary Education; Family School Relationship; *Folk Culture; Foreign Countries; Legends; *Minority Group Children; *Multicultural Education; Mythology; North American Culture; North American Literature; School Community Relationship
IDENTIFIERS Canada; Fairy Tales

ABSTRACT

The use of folklore in education contributes to children's normal psychological development, but children of minority cultures have difficulty in understanding and relating to European myths and legends. All folklore reflects universal social and psychological conflicts, but Native and European myths differ in the particular symbols or codes used to embody the message. There is an historical lack of respect for Native culture and literature in Canadian education, and the non-Native teacher may be unfamiliar with the content and structure of Native folk material. Such teachers find that Indian children lack the skills to predict events in Western stories, to recognize story scheme, and to compose structurally "good" stories, although these children may be quite competent in the context of their traditional narratives. Indian children are often bewildered by the white man's stories, particularly by the violence in Western fairy tales, and Indian adults, remembering these tales, produce endings and interpretations quite different from those given by non-Natives. The oral tradition still exists among Native North Americans, and the teacher who wishes to use Native myths and legends in the classroom should enlist the aid of parents and elders. The paper includes 13 references. (SV)

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Culture Specific Materials:

Stories My Kokum and Mushoom Tell

by

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Bruno Bettelheim, in his book The Uses of Enchantment, discusses the role of folklore in the treatment of disturbed children, and from that perspective draws some significant conclusions regarding the use of folk and fairy tales in the development of the normal, healthy child. He believes education must assist the child in finding meaning in life.

> Regarding this task, nothing is more important than the impact of parents and others who take care of the child; second in importance is our cultural heritage when transmitted to the child in the right manner.
> [1]

The use of the term "our cultural heritage" is significant. What if the school system is transmitting an alien culture, a culture at best unfamiliar to the child and, at worst, a culture at variance with the one taught in the home? Canadian schools have traditionally transmitted a culture based on "our" European heritage, both implicitly and explicitly, and the price paid by students from minority cultures has been high.

Bettelheim capably makes his case for the value of folklore in education when he says that children exposed to conflict in fantasy will be better able to cope with it in real life. If children do not experience conflict ritually, they have no model for resolving conflict and are forced to do so without guidance.

When we attempt to rectify omissions of the past with regard to myth and legend from Native cultures we run into several problems. First is the historical lack of respect for Native culture and consequently the literature. As late as 1964 May Hill Arbuthnot, in Children and Books warned educators that Indian legends

> are by and large neither sufficiently dramatic nor well enough organized to command interest. ... the variants of old world tales collected among the North American Indians gives one the impression that their narrators were incapable even of preserving a good tale, to say nothing of inventing a new one. While this may sound like an extreme statement, as a matter of fact, it is largely true.
> [2]

Though this book has since been revised (1972) and the section on Indian mythology has been dramatically changed, there still are educators who were indoctrinated by the 1964 edition whose views have not changed.

Another problem with including Native folklore is that the teachers themselves are not familiar with it, therefore prefer not to teach it. Conversely, children suffer the same problems when confronted with the folklore from the teacher's culture. Paula Gunn Allen, a Native writer has pointed out that.

> A person who is raised in a given culture has no problems seeing the relevance, the level of complexity, or the symbolic significance of a culture's literature.[3]

Surely it is the teacher who should adapt her teaching and content material to the understanding of the student, not vice versa. So often in the past the onus to adapt has been on the child. This likely has contributed in no small measure to lack of success on the part of Native students.

Myth and legend plays a vital role in any culture and though it may not be immediately evident in some Native communities, the folklore is still being transmitted. I have worked almost exclusively with Native teachers-in-training in the last fifteen years and rarely find a student who does not have some knowledge of the myths and legends of the culture. In most cases they are able to tell legends and myths with great competence and gusto - all they are waiting for is the opportunity to do so. These are the educators of today and tomorrow. To incorporate more Native literature into school curricula is not a pipe dream; it <u>is</u> reality in some schools

Myth is a universally true reflection of some of the central social and psychological conflicts faced by people at all times. While similar messages may be repeated again and again in various parts of the world and throughout all periods

of history, the particular symbols or codes in which they become embodied convey a kind of local literature.[4]

The trickster, whether he is known as We-sa-ka-chak (with its various pronunciations), Nanabush, Old Man, Coyote, Badger, Raven, Earthmaker, etc. is found in all Indian cultures. Native people raised with their own folklore have no problem understanding his significance. He is the creator, he is the teacher and a role model but at the same time he also epitomizes the weakness of humanity. Because he does this so accurately - his insatiable appetites, his jealousy, his gullibility, his lack of insights - his shortcomings are very familiar. They lead to ludicrous and humorous situations. Mention the trickster's name to a classroom of Indian children and broad smiles cross their faces. Precious learning time is wasted when the teacher does not recognize this area of the children's competence.

It is important that children have the opportunity to continue their growth with the literature of their own culture when they start school because myths have various functions in different societies. At the most obvious level they instruct. Less obvious, but equally important, is the psychological function. Myths represent the outward demonstrations of internal conflicts experienced in every generation. The distinctive challenge of mythology is to take individuals through historical journeys and adventures of long ago, as John Tetso in Trapping is My Life words it, "in the days of bow and arrow".[5] This takes students through psychological and spiritual journeys which are phrased in familiar codes and symbols. This will help them to become fully functioning humans in the culture of today. Teachers must recognize this dual purpose of mythology and will then recognize the importance of the child's own folklore.

Individuals must explore the mythical world on their own, but ultimately must come back to everyday society with new contributions. Once they have mastered this transition

they can pass back and forth at will between the spiritual world and the world of social action. In other words, they become balanced between the inner and outer realities. If the children can learn to appreciate literature and mythology as guides to the inevitable complexities and crises of life, they will be able to discover, to enjoy and to create poetry, fiction and art in their own way. I always deplore, however, the custom I often see in some classrooms where children are given the task of "creating" a legend. An assignment where they re-tell a legend they have heard is much better. To "create" a new legend is a contradiction in terms. Legends come from a time when the earth was not what it is today. They come from a time when rational scientific explanations were not readily available. To ask children to create a new legend is to give them an impossible task - as realistic as asking them to write a new Bible story.

This does not mean that legends do not grow and change. The combination of the old and the new give legends told today a particular brand of humour. It is in the trickster tales that this is most often found and it is never found in sacred myths. The trickster continues his wanderings in modern society, and although his pranks are timeless, the situations are contemporary.

One contemporary legend explains why the city of Winnipeg, which means "muddy water" bears its name: the trickster attempted to fly like Santa Claus and his subsequent trashing around in a river has muddied the waters hundreds of miles away.[6] Another tale tells why the song "Your Cheating Heart" is so popular in northern Manitoba. It is being sung by the trickster, always a poor loser, because he was outwitted by a Windigo in a contest.[7]

Ron Roulette, a Native story-teller best sums up the role of the trickster when he says,

> The important thing about the Old Man is that no matter where Indian people go, he will go with them. Story telling is more than entertainment. It is an expression of life. The stories of We-sa-ka-chak share the joys and sorrows of being human.
>
> The Old Man might not like noise and he might go away to his island once in a while, but We-sa-ka-chak will always come back because someone will always be telling stories about him.[8]

I used Roulette's tape with a double classroom of Grade Four students at Norway House, Manitoba. Besides talking about myth and legend, Ron Roulette also tells several stories. The children listened in absolute silence. The voice of this older person, speaking English with a familiar Cree intonation, accent and pronunciation kept them spellbound for half an hour. Later, I received thank-you letters from the children and one little fellow wrote:

> This has been the happiest day of my life. I have never heard Indian stories in school before.

Another wrote:

> At last I have a story about We-sa-ka-chak to tell my grandfather that he doesn't know!

I know that the school used Cree material; the teachers were both Cree. I believe it was the voice and the style of delivery of the old story teller that brought the home and the school experience together for these children.

Indian myths and legends must not be confused with fairy tales. They are much more than one-dimensional tales of animals and men. A rich body of folklore exists, both oral and written, and yet we see, even in classrooms where one hundred percent of

the students are Native, that the books which are used come largely from Western culture. Most common are nursery rhymes and fairy tales. Through fairy tales recognizable stylistic patterns are taught - the opening phrase of "Once upon a time", the abrupt ending, the magic number three all giving shape and pattern to the story. These patterns acquire implicit significance for the child who is exposed to them again and again.[9]

Teachers expect children to be able to predict events in stories and recognize story schema even before they start to read. Both the predictions and schema come from Western literature. Indian children often are found lacking in these skills, yet they too can predict events and recognize patterns - but in their own folklore. The children may well be developing as they should but the stories used by the teachers may be wrong.

Fairy tales are products of Western culture and are not only structurally but thematically different from Indian folklore. Though there are some structural similarities, by and large significantly different structures are found. The beginning of the tale is more commonplace - "One day Nanabush went walking" or a variant thereof. The ending is not definite and this is logical because most trickster tales are part of a cycle. In many cases, however, there is a conclusion which explains why a certain phenomenon of nature exists. The "magic" number three is replaced by the "sacred" number four with all its religious significance. There are no child heros or orphans who overcome obstacles. Instead characters are more likely to be animals of undetermined age or sex. Repetition is a stylistic device. The story does not fit the Western concept of what a "good" story should be, that is, a story with a beginning, middle and ending; a story with suspense and a definite resolution of a problem. This often creates problems in composition for the Native child when a teacher demands a "good" opening sentence and a "good" conclusion. "Nanabush went walking" can be both a good opening and closing sentence!

George Clutesi, a Tse-shat Indian, clearly understand the dilemma of an education system geared to a specific culture in a multi-cultural society. He addresses the problem of the Indian child when the culture is ignored by the education system. He writes,

> The Indian child is prone to accept these fairytales as folklore stories of the white man and therefore the truth, since he is no longer able to hear many of his own peoples' folklore tales.[11]

Though Clutesi is likely unfamiliar with Bettelheim's work he understands the implications of such an education process. He goes on to say.

> ... there is bewilderment in the average Canadian Indian. There is, in fact, a broken link in his life growing period.[11]

Alice French, an Inuit, also tells about her confusion and bewilderment in a white boarding school. She comments on her own very literal interpretation of nursery rhymes and goes on to say,

> I worried about my teacher sometimes. She did not seem to know the difference between what creatures could and could not do.[12]

Clutesi also comments on nursery rhymes but refers specifically to violent images.

> The Indian child of today is left bewildered by the white man's fairy tales that are too often tragic, injurious and harmful and frequently foster anxiety in the childish mind.[13]

He goes on to say,

> The Indian child feels bewilderment with this type of nursery rhyme because there seems to be no concern or regard for a very apparent injury inflicted upon a child - which, in his world, may well be himself.[13]

Violence is by no means confined to Rock-a-bye Baby and Humpty Dumpty. When Nanabush becomes enraged with Rabbit for tricking the other animals into believing that the sun will not rise again, he grabs Rabbitt by the ears and s-t-r-e-t-c-h-e-s them to their present length. He also punches him and splits his lip! Now a split lip with blood oozing out is gorier, in my view, than Humpty Dumpty with egg yolk oozing out! So what point am I making? What point is Clutesi making? Folklore is tempered with many nuances and interpretations. It is told in many different contexts and for many different reasons. It is not meant to be interpreted literally. We smile at Alice French when she worries about her teacher because the teacher seems to think a cat can play a fiddle but when we do not understand the folklore within the context of the culture we are inclined to mininterpret and if we are young, we are inclined to interpret literally.

Several years ago I read an article in Canadian Children's Literature where the writer discussed "Little Red Riding Hood" and pronounced it "the" Canadian fairy tale.[14] He built his case around an experiment he did at the University of Winnipeg. He asked the students to write out the story as they remembered it and then analyzed what they had emphasized. He found imagery and interpretations that were very similar to what Bruno Bettelheim has said about fairy tales and the role they play in a culture. The wolf represented evil forces, even the lurking rapist, and the forest, of-course was the threatening environment.

I became curious about whether Indian adults would recall the story in the same way, so I duplicated the experiment. Whereas the University of Winnipeg students all remembered the story, many of the Native students did not remember the ending. Also, their interpretations were markedly different. The forest was not threatening - it was most often referred to as a bush and in some cases the wolf hid behind a tree. The wolf was not out to harm Red Riding Hood; the wolf was hungry and wanted the goodies in her basket. The grandmother was not sick, she was old and Red Riding Hood brought her her food routinely, hence the wolf knew when good food was passing by. In keeping with the "happily ever after" ending the Native students were quite innovative. The most common ending was the grandmother, Red Riding Hood and the woodcutter who had come to their rescue sharing the food. In no cases was the grandmother eaten. In several cases the wolf also was invited to share the goodies.[15]

The role of myths and legends in traditional society was much more important than it is in contemporary society and many children are still being raised in the oral tradition. The fact that oral tradition still exists among Native North Americans is significant in the teaching of myths and legends. Any teacher who wishes to consider mythology seriously in the classroom should be aware that many Native students are able to go to parents and grandparents for instruction and some older Native people may be willing to talk to classes. The Maoris of New Zealand have a system of "Grandmother schools" where traditions and language are taught to the very young by the older women.[16]

George Clutesi vividly portrays the value of using elders in Canadian schools when he describes the role of Nan-sis, the story teller.

> In spite of his great age Nan-sis is still a very important member of society. He was the story-teller to all his ka-coots [grandchildren]. Moreover, he was loved and respected, understood by all because of his great patience with the young and

> his great love for them was very evident in his voice and speech.[17]

Basil Johnston, an Ojibway, also speaks of the role of elders.

> It was the elders ... who taught about life through stories, parables, fables, allegories, songs, chants and dances. They were the ones who had lived long enough and had had a path to follow and were deemed to posses the qualities for teaching ....[18]

The process of transmission of oral narratives has remained largely unchanged, and it is obvious that there is great discrepancy between the traditional Native methods of teaching and the instruction in the structured classrooms in which Indian children are placed today. This great discrepancy need not continue as Native parents become more involved in the education of their own children.

NOTES

1
Bruno Bettelheim, The Uses of Enchantment (New York: Alfred A. Kopf, 1976), p.4.

2
May Hill Arbuthnot, Children and Books (London: Scott, Foresman & Co., 1964), p.172.

3
Paula Gunn Allen, "The Sacred Hoop: A Contemporary Perspective on American Indian Literature" in Studies in American Indian Literature (New York: The Modern Language Association of American, 1983), p.3.

4
Grant, Agnes, Monographs in Education: Native Literature in the Curriculum (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba, 1986) p.p. 29-30.

5
Tetso, John, Trapping is My Life (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1970), p.18.

6
Author's note: In the spring of 1981 I heard this story about We-sa-ka-chak and Santa Claus told by an Indian from Lac la Ronge, Saskatchewan.

7
Author's note: In the fall of 1983 I heard several different versions of this story at Cross Lake, Manitoba. "Your Cheating Heart" was originally composed by singer/composer Hank Williams.

8
Ron Roulette, Native Storytelling (Winnipeg: Manitoba Department of Education, 1981..

9
Jon Stott, Gods and Heros: Myth, Legend and Fantasy for Elementary and Junior High Winnipeg: Children's Literature Services Workshop, 1983.

10 George Clutesi, Son of Raven, Son of Deer (Sidney, B.C.: Gray's Publishing, 1967), p.12.

11 Ibid, p.13.

12 Alice French, My Name is Masak (Winnipeg: Peguis Publishers, 1976), p.38.

13 Clutesi, p.p. 9-11.

14 Perry Nodelman, " 'Little Red Riding Hood' as a Canadian Fairy Tale" in Canadian Children's Literature, No. 20, 1980

15 Grant, Agnes, "The Canadian Fairy Tale: What is It?" in Canadian Children's Literature, No. 21, 1981.

16 Verna Kirkness and Connie Singleterry, MOKAKIT Indian Research Association Meeting, Winnipeg, Sept. 28, 1987.

17 Clutesi, p. 11.

18 Basil Johnston, Ojibway Heritage, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979), p.69.